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Much to learn from open debates

MY VIEW -
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HAVING been to Indonesia recently after some time gave me a somewhat different feel. Ironically, it felt like Malaysia at one point in time.

The terminal where the MAS plane landed was surprisingly cheerful and welcoming – reminiscent of KLIA when it was dubbed as the airport in the forest.

It was not cluttered. In fact, luxuriously spacious just as in the Jakarta bandara (airport). In addition, passengers on arrival were offered buggy rides to the immigration station which is quite a distance away.

The passage through the immigration and customs was swift and friendly. Smiles everywhere. In all, the travel was pleasant. This was how KLIA was once a upon a time as far as I recall.

Today it is vastly different. The place seems cluttered with adverts and displays almost randomly located.

Some are oversized and rather out of place. It is overcrowded with “duty free” outlets as though we are in a megamall. A shopper’s paradise as it were.

The airport in the forest tag is not relevant any more. The new forest is populated with shops and more shops selling the same stuff found in other airports all over the world.

Sadly, they are mostly things that are foreign to Malaysia carrying famous brand names, purportedly, with no relationship to the country’s heritage and history.

In contrast, Indonesia’s bandara (bandar udara) showcase products that are closely linked to the local culture and heritage to the delight of unsuspecting visitors.

The Indonesians seem to have plenty to “show off” not just their handiwork but in very artistic ways too.

Let alone the traditional batiks and other exquisite handmade goods cleverly designed to appeal to tourists.

They are now highly recognised worldwide. I was particularly struck by the presentation of the local version of “travelling bags” made of colourful woven fabric and piled up to convey a simple but elegant message of international sojourn.

It demystifies what travel means in the rooting of relationships and understanding that takes hard work to build and maintain.

In contrast, we are more keen to display imported branded items that are culturally alien and meaningless to us conveying superficial values of instant gratification.

These are after all mass produced to appeal to those who are least connected to local cultural values and the like.

And as one steps out of the bandara into the city, the contrast seems to be more enhanced.

Not so much in terms of physical structures but more of the aura – the sound and feel.

At that time, Indonesia was preparing for its presidential election come April.

The city was adorned with banners to this effect – creative and “courageous”.

It so happened that this time it coincided with the second round of the presidential debates (something that never materialised for us) giving an aura of democracy (some say democreative) so clear that there is no room for pretence.

There were many critics of the debates – some welcoming it while others wished it was better placed.

In any case, the issue of 4IR was not missed as both presidential candidates gave their views and preferences.

Coincidentally, I was there at the invitation of two universities to dwell on the subject of “Humanising 4IR”. The timeliness cannot be more telling as to their concern and interest in the subject in trying to influence political decisions instead of the other way as in our case.

That aside the presidential debate was in itself fodder for criticism. Every fact spewed up by the candidates was scrutinised by the academe and media so that the country is not taken for a “ride”.

For example, even the claim by the incumbent that “there has been no forest and land fires” since 2017 was refuted by the Environment and Forest Ministry data verifying thousands of hotspots detected between the same period although the number is decreasing.

So much so the incumbent had to correct his statement the very next day. No attempt to skirt around it, less still blaming others for misquoting as is often the tendency.

Similarly for the aspiring candidate, giving new and refreshing inputs that help the Indonesians and their universities to play an important role as public intellectuals in the real sense of the word.

Something that is virtually missing in our intellectual midst where KPIs seem to be the major preoccupation.

Given the overall verdict following the second debate as “barely scratching the surface” according to the influential *Jakarta Post*, it reemphasised the point that Indonesia is ready to debate its future in a more open way than we Malaysians are prepared to.